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ABSTRACT

Effective education requires a balance between cognitive dissonance and emotional safety. This relationship is particularly important in the social studies, where the broad goal of societal improvement necessitates the contemplation of sensitive social and personal issues. Nonetheless, a recent investigation of the elementary social studies in the state of Delaware demonstrates that dissonance and safety are often imbalanced or isolated in classroom practice. For many teachers, these goals are viewed as mutually exclusive. Emotional safety is given greater priority, and the dissonance that does occur is often unintentional, offered without adequate support, or unidirectionally applied to some situations but not others. This paper examines existing imbalances between cognitive dissonance and emotional safety in the elementary classroom and considers the kinds of relationships necessary to promote social development for the greater good within a pluralistic society. An affectively safe classroom environment can and should serve as a necessary backdrop for addressing difficult, often controversial social issues even in the earliest of grades. (Author/JAG)

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NEGOTIATING DISSONANCE AND SAFETY:

SOCIAL EDUCATION IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Effective education requires a balance between cognitive dissonance and emotional safety. This relationship is particularly important in the social studies, where the broad goal of societal improvement necessitates the contemplation of sensitive social and personal issues. Nonetheless, a recent investigation of the elementary social studies in the state of Delaware demonstrates that dissonance and safety are often imbalanced or isolated in classroom practice. For many teachers, these goals are viewed as mutually exclusive. Emotional safety is given greater priority, and the dissonance that does occur is often unintentional, offered without adequate support, or unidirectionally applied to some situations but not others. This paper examines existing imbalances between cognitive dissonance and emotional safety in the elementary classroom and considers the kinds of relationships necessary to promote social development for the greater good within our pluralistic society. I suggest that an affectively safe classroom environment can and should serve as a necessary backdrop for addressing difficult, often controversial social issues even in the earliest of grades.

NEGOTIATING DISSONANCE AND SAFETY:

SOCIAL EDUCATION IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

Education involves a balance between cognitive dissonance and emotional safety. This relationship is particularly important in the social studies, where the broad goal of societal improvement necessitates the contemplation of sensitive social and personal issues. Nonetheless, a recent investigation of the elementary social studies in the state of Delaware demonstrates that dissonance and safety are often imbalanced or isolated in classroom practice (Houser, 1995; Thornton & Houser, 1994). For many teachers, these goals are viewed as mutually exclusive. Emotional safety is given greater priority, and the dissonance that does occur is often unintentional, offered without adequate emotional support, or unidirectionally applied to some situations and students but not others.

This paper examines existing imbalances between cognitive dissonance and emotional safety and considers the kinds of relationships necessary to promote social development for the greater good of society. First, I describe the broader study upon which the paper is based. Next, I define cognitive dissonance and emotional safety and discuss their importance for social education. Then, utilizing data from the Delaware study, I examine the relationships between safety and dissonance in elementary classrooms. I conclude with a discussion of implications for practice.

The Delaware Study

The Delaware study was a statewide project that analyzed teacher interviews, school and district surveys, curriculum materials, and state census and demographic data to gain a better

understanding of the elementary social studies (Houser, 1995; Thornton & Houser, 1994). The purpose of the project was to investigate practitioners' definitions of social studies, their goals and practices, and their views on the value and status of the social studies relative to other subjects. A qualitative methodology and interpretivist theoretical framework were used to collect and analyze the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Jacob, 1987; Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Mishler, 1979).

The investigation concluded that social studies was under represented and undervalued within the overall curriculum, that it was often reduced to isolated disciplines such as history, geography and economics, and that socializing the individual child into broader society was a pervasive underlying concern. Although some attention was given to "multicultural education," these efforts often failed to address the need for equity education within a pluralistic society. Finally, even egalitarian goals calling for "cooperation," "self-esteem," "getting along" and "respecting others" often served to assimilate marginalized students into the sociocultural mainstream while leaving dominant perspectives and practices intact.

Social studies was considered uninteresting and unimportant by students and teachers alike. A primary cause of its low status was that vital issues affecting students and teachers were omitted from the curriculum. While many teachers sought to provide a safe, comfortable learning environment, few addressed personally relevant social issues or utilized critical instructional approaches necessary to generate interest and facilitate meaningful social development.

Many of the teachers were reluctant to confront controversial topics, particularly those issues that challenged the sociocultural mainstream or that threatened their own social, professional or personal security. Although a few teachers modified their practices through critical social and personal examination, these teachers received little support for their efforts.

Indeed, those who questioned prevailing norms often experienced intense resistance from outside the school (e.g., from parents seeking to preserve the opportunity for their own children to excel) and from within (e.g., from fellow educators concerned with maintaining control and authority and otherwise preserving the efficiency of the organization) (e.g., McNeil, 1986; Willis, 1977).

Cognitive Dissonance and Emotional Safety

Although social educators differ over specific goals and approaches, most agree that promoting the greater good of society should be the primary focus of the social studies (Hertzberg, 1981; Stanley, 1985). Thus, one way to think about social education is to consider the extent to which classroom practice promotes individual social development conducive to broad societal improvement. Such development requires increased understanding and identification with a broad cross-section of sociocultural others, critical social and self examination, the knowledge, skills and convictions needed to advocate equal opportunity, and a willingness to modify one's own perspectives and actions for the good of society (Banks, 1987; Barth, 1984; Giroux, 1985; Greene, 1988; Houser, In Press; Noddings, 1992).

Like other forms of psychological growth, social development involves a balance between cognitive dissonance and emotional safety. Throughout life, humans experience, interact with, and interpret information within the environment. As these interpretations are accumulated and interrelated, they form a cognitive structure, or schema (Piaget, 1972). When humans encounter information inconsistent with their existing beliefs, they experience a sense of uncertainty, or cognitive dissonance. As existing understanding is reconciled with the dissonant information, the schema is gradually elaborated, refined and otherwise modified (Anderson, 1985; Neisser, 1976;

Piaget, 1972). To this extent, cognitive dissonance provides a basis for psychological development, including the development of knowledge about self, society and the relationship therein.

Although cognitive dissonance is necessary for social development, dissonance offered without adequate emotional support can lead to frustration and fear (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Kohl, 1967). When these feelings result in the rejection of new ideas before they have been fully considered, they preclude further learning. Therefore, although dissonance may be essential to the developmental process, it must be offered against a backdrop of "emotional safety."

Within an "emotionally safe" classroom, cognitive dissonance exists in a broader context that affirms the child as a whole person (Atwell, 1988; Houser, In Press; Nieto, 1992; Paley, 1992). In such an environment, dissonance is provided in manageable increments, and authentic questions are valued rather than being dismissed as "irrelevant" or "stupid." An emotionally safe environment encourages students to take intellectual and affective risks by discussing personal perspectives even if they differ from those of their peers or teacher. Such an environment is also "child-centered" in that the students' interests, experiences and emotional needs provide the necessary beginning for further development (e.g., Dewey, 1938, 1964). Finally, an emotionally safe classroom embraces a "norm of pluralism" in which cultural diversity and societal well-being are considered mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive. It affirms not only a diversity of bodies, but also a diversity of ideas (Ellsworth, 1992; Greene, 1988, 1993; Nieto, 1992; Noddings, 1992).

The relationship between cognitive dissonance and emotional safety is particularly important in the social studies. Many social issues are emotionally charged, and contemplating

the possibility that one's own beliefs and actions might actually be part of the problem can be particularly threatening. Therefore, although it is essential to maintain a critical orientation toward society and self, this stance must be balanced by an equally active search for affirmation, collaboration and possibility (Giroux, 1985; Greene, 1988; Nieto, 1992).

Finally, the relationship between dissonance and safety is all the more crucial in a society such as our own. If any individual or group within a democratic and pluralistic society is required to challenge its views or actions, all individuals and groups should be expected to do the same. This applies not only to those who have been marginalized within society, but also to the European American "mainstream" that has systematically dominated the ideologies and actions of other sociocultural groups. The teacher's task is to establish an environment that will challenge the views of all the students and provide each with the necessary support to meet those challenges.

Dissonance and Safety in the Elementary Classroom

Although optimum learning may require a balance between dissonance and safety, the Delaware study indicated that safety was often given greater priority among elementary teachers. In some cases, safety precluded cognitive dissonance altogether. The cognitive dissonance that did occur was often unintentional, socially and emotionally decontextualized, or unidirectionally applied to some students but not others. The following sections examine these practices in greater detail.

Emotional Safety

Many participants in the Delaware study considered emotional safety more important than cognitive dissonance. Unlike cognitive dissonance, emotional safety was frequently identified as an educational priority. Words like "safety," "comfort," "fun," "hands-on," "risk free," "getting along," "making learning positive," and "building self-esteem" were used by teachers of all grades to describe their broad educational goals. As one teacher said, "I want them [my students] to feel comfortable. I want to create an atmosphere where they like to learn and they feel nurtured and loved."

Other teachers sought to promote "cooperation" and "respect" in order to reduce stress and conflict. One teacher noted, "(I)f parents aren't teaching kids how to show respect--how to get along with others--then teachers have to do it."

Although emotional safety is essential, safety without dissonance may do little to promote substantive social development. Unfortunately, practices designed to promote "comfort," "love," "cooperation" and "respect" were frequently unidirectional and uncritical. There was little indication that students were encouraged to consider that not all perspectives (e.g., bigotry, greed) are equally deserving of "respect" or that "getting along" is always best for society. Moreover, when social change was discussed, attention was typically focused on the need to change those who deviate from the dominant social system (e.g., those who do not "respect" others, those who do not "get along" in society) rather than changing the system itself.

Uncritical approaches such as these perpetuate a "sanitized" curriculum in which the cognitive dissonance required for social improvement is either socially and emotionally

decontextualized or eliminated altogether (e.g., Banks, 1987; Fine, 1987). This was the case with a fourth grade teacher who was asked about the definition and purpose of the social studies:

> It means to know about ourselves, about our nation, about our country...I feel like the kids need to be aware.

Few would question whether knowing about oneself and one's nation is an important educational goal. However, as the interview continued it became clear that the "awareness" to which this teacher referred related to map skills, computer literacy, and other relatively benign matters. Controversial social issues were addressed only in response to direct and persistent questioning, and when these topics did arise, they were soon dropped to return to safer matters. Thus, when asked to further consider whether there was any real value or need for the social studies, the fourth grade teacher responded:

> Well it's important in how you do things in life, you know. If you don't know what's happening in the Persia Gulf--if you don't know a war is coming it might catch you by surprise! Those kinds of things. And I feel like that the kids have to know about our country and they have to know about where things are in our country--I mean the maps, very heavily and I think it's important for them to be able to tell me where Washington is or Oklahoma is or Delaware is on a map, and the world if I can get that far.

This teacher worked in a large school with an ethnically diverse student population. Approximately 20% of the students lived below the poverty line. Considerable dissent existed within the school and community. These tensions were exacerbated by recent incidents including

a handgun in school, charges of sexual harassment, and highly publicized Ku Klux Klan activity in a neighboring community.

Given these immediate conditions and the current status of society in general, it is difficult to justify reducing the social studies curriculum to the sanitized study of map skills, historical facts, and the like. Although teachers might understandably wish to avoid the difficult issues confronting their students, such avoidance is educationally unsound. Neither the students, their teachers, nor society in general can afford to ignore such matters. Nor does the need for student-centered instruction diminish simply because the student's experiences are socially volatile.

Cognitive Dissonance

Unlike emotional safety, which was an explicit goal for many of the teachers, promoting cognitive dissonance for social development was a relatively low priority. In spite of occasional references to "critical thinking," the participants' goals and practices provided little indication that critical social and personal examination were considered educational necessities. Even when dissonance did exist, it was often unintentional, unidirectional or unmediated by emotional safety. This was the case with a fifth grade teacher who described why she used "mini-society," an extended simulation approach that teaches the principles and processes of capitalism:

> I believe that the kids need to know about real life. We have businesses. We buy and sell, and we have to learn how to cooperate with each other when we do businesses together...(W)e had a child write a bad check. That was a bad experience. He had to pay. It's just a good learning experience.

Such activities can create dissonance insofar as they introduce previously unknown economic principles, elicit mathematical and management related calculations, and so forth. They can also create dissonance for students who have to "pay" if they are caught writing "bad checks" or committing other violations against the established system. However, without adequate concern for emotional safety, dissonance can be counter-productive. Consider the further comments of this fifth grade teacher:

> The value of social studies, I think, is the idea of real life and learning to cooperate with others...It's building not only self-esteem but skills that you need to get along in the world...Like in real life you can do your job really well, but if you cannot get along and cooperate and follow the rules of the business and the society, you can get fired.

Approaches like mini-society can help students better understand certain economic principles and processes; however, they can also be educationally unsound if they admonish those who are unsuccessful within the prevailing system (e.g., those who get fired or write bad checks) while failing to critique the system itself. To this extent, such approaches can fail to anticipate the dissonance that exists for students whose life experiences (created in part by the very system "mini-society" seeks to simulate) prevent them from envisioning themselves as potential benefactors of the existing system. Nonetheless, among the 20 interviews and 96 total surveys in the Delaware study, only one participant indicated that critical assessment of the "free market" system or discussion of alternative economic approaches were admitted into classroom practice.

Uncritical educational approaches are also unsound for those who assume the existing social system is beyond reproach. In the absence of any perceived need for change, those groups

and individuals most responsible for perpetuating existing social conditions are released from the responsibility for critical self-examination (e.g., Baldwin, 1988; Banks, 1989; Nieto, 1992). When this occurs, social development is minimized for members of the dominant culture as well.

Thus, emotional safety and cognitive dissonance are often imbalanced in the elementary classroom. While emotional safety was a priority for Delaware teachers, cognitive dissonance for social development was frequently minimized. When cognitive dissonance did occur, it was often unintended, one-sided, or unmediated by emotional safety. In some cases, cognitive dissonance was socially and emotionally decontextualized (e.g., it focused on map skills or mathematical calculations rather than personally significant issues related to the students' everyday concerns), and in other cases it existed for some individuals but not others. Although the lack of balance between dissonance and safety was sometimes unintentional, the results of unintended conditions can be just as damaging as if they were created by design.

Explaining the Imbalance Between Dissonance and Safety

There are several possible explanations for the imbalances between emotional safety and cognitive dissonance in elementary classrooms. Perhaps the simplest explanation is that teachers view these goals as mutually exclusive. It is possible that cognitive dissonance is considered a direct and irreconcilable threat to the "more important" goal of promoting emotional safety. This view would help explain why the fourth grade teacher focused on something as benign as map skills even when the need and opportunity to discuss more serious issues existed all around her.

Another explanation is that teachers may not consider promoting social change part of their professional role. For example, when asked whether the teacher's role involves changing

society in general, a kindergarten teacher replied, "I would say no, I don't think that's part of my role...I can't see myself changing society." This explanation would help account for activities like "mini-society" that focus more upon perpetuating existing social systems than contemplating substantive social change.

Yet another possible explanation for the imbalance between safety and dissonance is that teachers fear a loss of control and respect. Consider, for example, an incident in which a European American teacher was publicly charged that she was "prejudiced":

> Then this boy raises his hand and he says,"You know, I have two friends who were fourth-graders a couple of years ago and both of them said that you and this teacher and this teacher, all three of you, were prejudiced." There's this hushed silence that kind of covered the room as this boy said this. The kids were all kind of looking around and most of them were just wide-eyed with terror that I was going to just kind of let go on this kid because he more or less just called his teacher "prejudiced."

The teacher acknowledged that the dissonance created by this experience was as real for herself as it was for her fourth-grade students:

> Part of me still wonders in the back of his mind if he is not thinking to himself [that I am prejudiced]...I'm not trying to defend myself--although I guess I am trying to prove something to him....It's always in the back of my head. Part of me is saying, you cannot treat him or respond to his behavior differently just because you have this fear.

This kind of fear may help explain the reduction of social education (and education in general) to socially and emotionally safe topics. Time-consuming memorization of geographical locations and historical facts leaves little room for discussions of racism, prejudice and other threatening social issues. Similarly, activities that presume the infallibility of existing political and economic systems preclude embarrassing questions about the potential inequities of those systems. To the extent that being perceived as "prejudiced" (or simply as being "wrong") threatens the foundations of classroom authority, the kind of fear described by this teacher provides a plausible explanation for many of the existing imbalances between emotional safety and cognitive dissonance in the elementary classroom.

Implications for Practice

Whatever the causes may be, imbalances between cognitive dissonance and emotional safety clearly exist in classroom practice. While emotional safety is often considered essential, many teachers are reluctant to address controversial social issues. This is particularly detrimental in the social studies, where promoting social development for the greater good requires attention to vital social and personal issues.

Decontextualized awareness of geography skills and historical facts, uncritical acceptance of dominant norms, and continued preservation of the sanitized curriculm have little to do with promoting the greater good of society. Rather, education for social improvement requires an understanding of the history and causes of social inequity, appreciation of those who have quietly struggled to improve the lives of others, knowledge of one's constitutional rights and

responsibilities, and skill in the use of "voice," political representation, social solidarity, compromise and resistence to narrow the gap between our national principles and social realities.

Fortunately, it is possible to negotiate satisfactory relationships between cognitive dissonance and emotional safety. Concern for the affective well-being of one's students does not have to preclude attention to difficult issues. Nor does one's own fear of loss of control have to prevent critical social analysis or self-examination. In fact, one might legitimately question just how safe students can really feel or how effective a teacher can actually be without adequate opportunity to address these vital concerns.

Greater dissonance can be provided in numerous ways. There is little reason, for example, that meaningful geography could not begin with the study of the students' own neighborhoods. By introducing a relatively benign subject (e.g., map skills) based upon the students' existing experiences, both the topic and process would contribute to the affective safety of the lesson.

This initial backdrop of emotional safety could be utilized and extended as the class addressed increasingly difficult issues influencing the local community. The students' familiarity with their own neighborhoods could be used to explore connections between the local environment and broader societal factors. These factors might include the unequal distribution of resources within communities, states and nations, the increasing focus on individual comfort rather than the common good, or the growing distrust and rejection of those who are "different." Beginning with the students' own experiences and perspectives, it is possible to develop greater understanding not only of their geographical location, but of their social location as well.

The mini-society activity indicated a need for dissonance that is socially contextualized and as challenging to those who perpetuate the prevailing social structure as to those who resist

unidirectional cultural assimilation. Creating this dissonance may involve little more than permitting students to discuss the limitations as well as the possibilities of the simulated system. For example, regularly scheduled "town meetings" might provide a forum for students to relate their personal observations to the vital issues (e.g., poverty, greed, the relationship between unlimited wants and finite resources in an increasingly populated world) and basic assumptions (e.g., that competition is necessary for excellence, that financial reward is necessary for motivation) of "free market" economics.

The opposite is true as well. Just as emotional safety does not have to preclude cognitive dissonance, dissonant experiences need not preclude emotional safety. One way to increase affective safety is to provide dissonance in reasonable increments. While the harsh realities of the holocaust, the genocide of Native Americans, and the brutal dehumanization of African slaves can and must be addressed, teachers might begin by focusing on playground discrimination or classroom oppression. Once students understand the basic concepts in terms of their immediate experiences, they will be better prepared to consider the increasingly vivid examples and more complex underpinnings of these pervasive social dilemmas.

As increasingly controversial situations are presented, and as students are asked to consider the extent to which their own views and actions may actually contribute to the problem, it is essential that they feel affirmed as human beings. Without such affirmation, critical self-examination may be rejected outright. Although uncomfortable issues and personal responsibilities must not be ignored, neither should they be presented in ways that lead to premature dismissal or outright rejection.

One way to affirm cognitive dissonance is to recognize that there are multiple ways of viewing the same situation (Blumer, 1969; Davis & Woodman, 1992). Individuals' actions usually make sense from their own perspective, even if they appear irrational to others. Nor is there any guarantee that one perspective is ultimately more correct than another (Belenky, et al., 1986; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Thus, teachers should not assume that their own understandings and moral perspectives are inherently superior to those of their students. Recognizing this fact can help teachers affirm their students' overall thinking and being while reserving the right to continue questioning the social impact of their particular views and actions.

This kind of approach was used by the teacher who was called "prejudiced." Rather than "letting go" on the student or dismissing his accusation outright, she spent the next 30 minutes discussing the issue with her class. In so doing, she challenged her students' specific thoughts and conclusions while supporting their right to have and to express perspectives that contradicted her own.

Although this teacher was fearful of being perceived as "prejudiced," she refused to sidestep the issue. Nor did she manifest her fear in the form of avoidance or anger directed toward her students. Taking seriously the charges leveled against her, she modeled a willingness to expose herself to the same kind of examination she expected of her class. In so doing, she helped create the necessary emotional conditions for her students to take risks of their own. She provided a forum for those students who believed they have been ill-served by the existing social system, and at the same time she communicated to the rest of her class that no system or individual should be beyond reproach.

In conclusion, optimum social education requires a balance between cognitive dissonance and emotional safety. This is particularly true in a democratic and pluralistic society, where promoting the greater good requires serious analysis and critical self-examination by all the people. Although emotional safety is vital, decontextualized lessons that provide little meaningful dissonance preclude opportunities for personal growth. On the other hand, dissonance unmediated by safety can result in frustration, fear and refusal even to contemplate alternative perspectives.

Greater balance between dissonance and safety can be achieved by utilizing students' experiences, interests and needs as the beginning point for meaningful learning. It can also be achieved by introducing dissonant ideas in reasonable increments and by affirming and encouraging an authentic diversity of perspectives. Education for the greater social good will be best served by teachers who recognize that dissonance and safety can be mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive, that social change is an inevitable aspect of the teacher's role, and that confronting one's own dissonance can help create the necessary conditions for students to take risks of their own. The ultimate task is to challenge the perspectives of all classroom participants while providing each with the emotional safety necessary to meet those challenges.

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